

MUST IT BE THE SAME OLD ME?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Post Yom Kippur - Must it Be the Same Old Me?

As I sit down to compose this week's dvar Torah on Motzei Yom Kippur (the night after Yom Kippur) the legend of the Ba'al Shem Tov's horses comes to mind. The Holy Ba'al Shem Tov was renowned, among other things, for his peculiar and super-efficient method of travel. Although he made use of the standard-issue horse- and-wagon that was the vogue back then, his buggy was far from ho-hum. Once his wagon would leave the city limits, where it was no longer in view, it would take flight - much to the delight of its equestrian constituent - miraculously transporting its travellers to their destination in a fraction of the time usually needed (and, needless to say, free of concern from hijackings, terrorists, and the like).

Once, it is told, the famed horses of the Ba'al Shem Tov's chariot got to thinking about their esteemed position. "We're not horses," said one to the other. "We can't be horses - after all, horses don't fly!"

"So what are we - birds? We don't look like birds. We don't even have wings!"

"No, silly! We're angels - in the form of horses. It simply must be so. Only angels could do the things we do!"

"Yeah," said the other, "I think you're on to something. We're angels! What else could we be?!"

As they whizzed along, the Russian countryside just a blur beneath their hooves, they became more and more convinced of their deduction that they were no ordinary colts. Angels - holy emissaries of the Almighty - that's what they were. And indeed, a very high order of angels at that, for not just any angel was given the task of serving the holy Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, whose name was revered and respected in both the physical and spiritual realms. Yes sir - not "mares" but "malachim (angels)" - and don't anyone forget it!

When they arrived outside the village of their destination, the chariot made its gentle descent back to the earth. The Ba'al Shem Tov told his wagon-driver to lead them to a watering trough, so that the horses may drink. The horses had indeed worked up quite a thirst (what with all their talk and contemplation), and eagerly dunked their long snouts into the trough to slurp up as much water as they could before the driver decided they had had enough. It was, it is told, in the middle of their guzzling that the one turned to the other, and with a knowing look and a sheepish smile said,

"Horses."

As we stand and pray in our shuls and shtieblach on Yom Kippur, bedecked with Kittel (traditional white garment worn by married men on Yom Kippur) and Talleisim, immersed in prayer and contemplation, we are overcome with a sense of holiness and determination. On Yom Kippur, like no other time during the year, a Jew understands clearly his true purpose in life. He disdains physical diversions, and resolves to live a life of purity and thoughtfulness. No longer will he fall prey to the machinations of his yetzer hara (immoral disposition) that have led him astray in the past! No longer will his prayer be simple "lip service!" No longer will his days pass him by in a flurry of activity, bereft of self-improvement, leading him nowhere fast!

One of the reasons we wear the Kittel on Yom Kippur is to resemble the angels, for on Yom Kippur we too are like angels - spurning all physical pleasures in favour of the spiritual. Yet if I can be like an angel on Yom Kippur - the Jew thinks - then why can't I be this way all year round? True I must eat, and make a living, but who's to say I can't live my life with the same aura of holiness and sanctity I feel now! Yes, indeed, I truly am changed; no longer the frail and feeble human I was just a few hours ago!

Then comes Motzei Yom Kippur; we go home, have a bite to eat, shmooze a little, klutz a little, and fall into bed. Inside our minds, we turn to ourselves and utter dejectedly, "Same old me!"

Last week (see *Olas Shabbos BeShabbato* 15-1), I wrote about and addressed what seems to be the universal pre Yom Kippur dilemma: "Haven't I been here before?" Perhaps, then, we could brainstorm now regarding what is perhaps the universal post Yom Kippur dilemma: "Same old me!"

In truth, the aspirations of living a life where every day is as precious and as replete with meaning as Yom Kippur, while providing us with a dream and a benchmark to which to aspire, are not realistic. We do not spend all day every day immersed in prayer; we eat and drink and shop and travel and work, and for most of us, the majority of our time is spent doing things not naturally conducive to attaining angelic purity. So was it all for naught? Are we doomed, year after year, to be left with this empty feeling that all our teshuva and introspection were but a temporary "spike" in the chart of our lives, destined to return to its same course as soon as our feet once again touch leather? Must we indeed resign ourselves to the bitter reality that "it's just the same old me," comforting ourselves with the thought that in just 353 days, we will once again be forgiven for our faults and follies?

According to the ba'alei mussar (teachers of ethics) - it doesn't have to be this way. While Yom Kippur gives us a taste of true piety, after Yom Kippur our task is to find a practical way to internalize our feelings of remorse and repentance. While it may not be possible, even after one very spiritually-charged day, to make the transition from man to malach, making significant change in our lives is not as difficult as it may first seem. Suppose you were to choose just two areas in your life where you felt improvement was needed. Choose one area where change is needed in a positive way, and one where a negative change is needed.

By way of example, what if one felt that, among many other changes, his berachos (blessings) over food needed improvement. That would be an area of positive change. And suppose that he felt he was too critical of others, often hurting their feelings. That would be an area of negative change.

The rest is simple: Take out a pen and paper (after Shabbos) and write down for yourself:

- 1) I am going to try for the next year, bli neder (without accepting this as a binding vow), to recite my blessings with increased concentration. I will pause for one second before reciting any beracha to make sure I'm thinking about what I'm saying. I will then say the beracha slowly, being careful not to swallow the words, and trying to think about the meaning of what I'm saying.
- 2) I will also try this year, bli neder, to be less critical of others. I will stop and think before I criticize, and I will try to see the good in others, instead of concentrating on the bad.

Now put this paper somewhere private where you can read it once a day - preferably first thing in the morning. It shouldn't take more than thirty seconds, and will certainly start your day off on the right foot. Once a week - this must actually be scheduled or it won't get done - take ten minutes to assess how your week went with regard to the two improvements you've accepted upon yourself, and to plan for the week ahead. Perhaps try to find a sefer from which you could learn during those ten minutes which deals with the issues in which you seek to change.

While this may seem like a relatively small goal - two areas out of tens or perhaps hundreds in which we feel deficient - consider the following: If you were to repeat this process each year for twenty years, you would have achieved significant and meaningful change in forty different areas of your life! After forty years, eighty areas of your life would have gone through permanent change! And gosh, anyone who can accomplish significant change in multiple areas of their lives, if not a tzaddik, is certainly on their way to becoming one! Consider keeping somewhere an ongoing list of the two yearly changes you've made - you'll be pleasantly (if alarmingly) surprised how quickly the list grows.

After working for one full year on these two areas, you will have achieved significant, meaningful, and lasting change. And what did it cost? Thirty seconds a day, ten minutes a week, and the resolve to turn this Yom Kippur experience into a practical and lasting one.

We may not be able to make the instant metamorphosis from man to malach, but small, significant changes are something everyone can strive for. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, we blow the shofar, which, as the Rambam writes, calls out, "Wake up, drowsy ones, from your slumber!" It is up to us to realize that with the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the real time for lasting teshuva has just begun!

Have a good Shabbos.

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